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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.



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Why I want Kamala to win

Chris Cutrone

Presented on October 30, 2024, for the panel discussion “The Left and the 2024 election” with Eddie Liger Smith (American Communist Party) and Jorge Mujica, hosted by the Platypus Affiliated Society at the University of Chicago.

I DON’T WANT to be a target.

If Trump wins, “cis-gender straight white males”

will be blamed — perhaps also “gay” ones like me.

We have had 8 years of attempted reeducation of the

population to try to prevent the election of anyone

like Trump ever again. Schoolchildren have been

told in no uncertain terms that they are guilty for our

bad, bad society. Trump paints a target on me.

Evidently, cis-gender (straight) white males are the

largest market for masochism. They are gluttons for

punishment. Also for sadism. At least in fantasy. But

I’m not — not so privileged. It’s a turn-off, actually.

But, evidently, it turns on so much of politics.

8 years of Trump is enough. 12 might be too much.

I have tried to make it into a teachable moment, but if

no one has learned by now, they never will. I am not

that much of a masochist. There was a viral video early

am frankly sick of still having to do so. Not defending

Trump, but defending the truth against Democratic

Party — and mainstream established Republican — lies.

As I said earlier this year, if you are in the right, you

shouldn’t have to lie. And they have lied about Trump.

I have tried to take Trump as expessing the

historical crisis of neoliberalism and potential change

in learning opportunity. Evidently, it’s not over yet.

If Trump wins, we could have 8 more years after

him of J.D. Vance. If Kamala wins, we nip all that in

the bud. — Don’t we? If Trump is stopped, that’s the

end of Trumpism, isn’t it? — But won’t Trumpism

continue after Trump? Might it be Vance in 4 years

for another 8 after all? Who knows? But both are

betting on it: one as hope, the other as fear.

One of the candidates is lying more than the

other. — They’re both lying.

But in one case I might want the lies to be true

— not in the other case.

They blame Trump for COVID. But after

Kamala said she would not trust the safety and

effectiveness of a vaccine developed under Trump,

her Administration forced people to take it. Both the

epidemic and the suffering caused by the measures

supposed to prevent it increased immeasurably

under Biden and Kamala. They also censored any

dissent from it. They called this “trusting the science”

— and denied any evidence to the contrary. Anthony

Fauci came out of retirement a last time to preach

shots and masks after getting COVID this year —

Kamala is going to “build that wall.” — Do I want

that? No. But it might be an inevitability. After all, it

started out as a Democrat promise in the Clinton era,

contra Republican neoliberal open borders policy. — As

late as 2019, Bernie himself said that open borders is

not a “policy of the Left,” because it undermines workers

about that just to get elected, due to the unpopularity

of recent events. — Democratic Party New York City

Major Eric Adams was targeted for prosecution after

he criticized the Biden Administration’s immigration

policies. But I don’t mind the hundreds of Venezuelans

and Haitians sheltered in my neighborhood. They

actually make me feel more at home amidst all the rich

white people. They are here to join the working class

— part of any potential future for socialism in the U.S.

Perhaps the Democrats let in enough people already, so

that now they want to close the door again.

Kamala is running for President as a prosecutor.

Do I support that? No. But there has been a reversal,

from the promise of criminal justice reform just a few

years ago under Trump — when Kamala encouraged

“defund the police” protesters and rioters — to a

more law-and-order policing mindset — with Trump

cast by her as the very quintessence of criminality.

But he markets his mugshot grinningly.

Kamala is going to be “strong” on foreign policy,

militarily backing both Ukraine and Israel — even as

the current Administration’s policies have failed to end

both wars — assuming they want to. They’ve trapped

Putin in Ukraine and are trying to bleed him dry. And

the U.S. is not going to stand in the way of getting rid

of Hamas and Hezbollah, especially since the latter are

responsible for hundreds of dead Marines, albeit 40

years ago. Their families remember. Trump is derided

as dangerously unpredictable and unreliable to U.S.

allies. But is he? Trump might not change anything,

or even represent changing anything, but Kamala

promises more of the same. Trump vows to stop the

wars — both of them — and prevent future ones. “Make

America Great Again” means making peace. Is it a lie?

To do this takes time and energy, and incredible

patience and resilience — which can be tested and

even broken, not by long hard struggle, but by

stupidity. What Trump has unleashed in

is in deadly earnest. Trump Derangement Syndrome

is a reality I can attest to from personal experience.

Trump has made not himself but his opponents

farcical. And yet it is all taken very seriously. They

are ugly, not amusing. Clowns can be frightening —

no

— is there no alternative?

alternatives to “genocide”? But there are genocides,

and there are genocides: not all are created equal.

Economically, the Biden Administration has been

equally an abject failure, erasing wage gains with

inflation. They claim Trump will raise inflation with

his tariffs, which is kind of rich coming from them.

Trump promises to lower inflation dramatically,

specifically by driving down energy costs through

supporting fossil fuel production and use. But

Kamala says proudly that the U.S. is drilling and

pumping oil and gas at levels higher than in Trump’s

first term. Not that the Democrats want to bring

prices down — no, they want to lower consumption, at

least by the working class. People will adapt or die.

Kamala claims that Trump will destroy Obamacare

and wreck the already strained U.S. healthcare

system. But Trump maintained and expanded it and

promises to only improve and not eliminate it. It’s a

cost-benefit analysis for him — as it is for her.

Kamala says Trump is supported by the nefarious

“community.” There are many divisions and conflicts,

which the Democrats suppress and pretend don’t

exist, to hold their voting constituency together, and

which Trump is happy to leave alone, apart from

some “common sense conservatism.” He criticized

DeSantis for going after Disney on gender. When he

was President he even proudly held up a rainbow flag

that he had upside down. But in the meantime that flag

has been replaced — by what exactly, no one knows.

Have I left anything out? Oh yeah, “climate

change.” But no one wants to hear about that. Not

when blowing up Nord Stream 2 released more

methane into the atmosphere than anything else

on record. Not when not only the U.S. but the world

depends on American economic recovery.

I grew up in the 1970s and have heard it all before

about environmental catastrophe and capitalism. As

back then, it is still now an expression of pessimism

and nihilism, appropriate to the political times.

I represent the cause of socialism and Marxism.

My interest is not in this election or any other in

capitalist politics, but in the task of educating young

people in the need to change the world.

To do this takes time and energy, and incredible

patience and resilience — which can be tested and

even broken, not by long hard struggle, but by

stupidity. What Trump has unleashed in

is in deadly earnest. Trump Derangement Syndrome

is a reality I can attest to from personal experience.

Trump has made not himself but his opponents

farcical. And yet it is all taken very seriously. They

are ugly, not amusing. Clowns can be frightening —

Video of the panel is available at

<https://youtu.be/8lbzy1Ka6Zc>.

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But it is a lie. pl
might be enough to elect Kamala. I want it to be true.
leave us alone? The promise of an end to the drama
believe they’re not lying about this, too? Will they finally
have lied about everything else, so why should we
— anyone will vote for her. Dare I hope for it? But they
the “new normal.” That is the reason — the only reason
4 years ago: getting back to normal — going back to
manipulation and the mind-games. What they promised
madness, an end to the intimidation and blackmail, the
I want Kamala to win so I can get a break from the
anonymously at the ballot-box? Not nearly enough.
trying to survive it all. Will they register their protest
quietly to and from work, thankful for their jobs, just
comed working class keeps its head down and goes
they are scaring us into submission. And it works. The
not to. It’s the denial that’s frightening. Gas-lighting:
supposed to notice. They are doing it while pretending
last 4 years on the greatest scale yet? But we are not
gas of neoliberalism has been just that, and for the
“disaster capitalism.” But who can deny that the last
never a fan of Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* thesis on
down after more than 8 years. I am not alone. I was
I have gone numb with fear. I am worn out. What
I would like to say that I am bored of it, but really
power to act on it. — I don’t want to be a target.
Trump and his supporters, they actually have the
all while proclaiming “Joy!” at the prospect. And, unlike
grudge and seething with anger and a lust for revenge,
become the most grim humorless people, holding a
anything besides anxiety and depression. They have
it impossible to think or even to live properly. — to feel
tired of dealing with hurt Democrats. They have made
preoccupations — their obsessions — and feelings. I am
they have taken seriously is not Trump but their own
enough. Actually, they’ve just lied about him. What
misread him, taking him literally but not seriously
I have always said that Trump’s critics have
eating each other. But I don’t want to be a target.
Ren and Stimpny. Icky and scratchy. Cats and dogs —
their sadness. Kamala and Walz. Trump and Vance.
Clinton. Sad clowns, all. Sad in their silliness. Silly in
of Marriage Act through Congress — signed by Bill
coach who hoped shepherded the anti-gay Defense
the House Dennis Hastert, the disgraced wrestling
Makes sense. Suburban Illinois gave us Speaker of
lived here. It is home of international Mr. Leather.
unfortunately, it makes all too much sense that the
entire adult life — the town of John Wayne Gacy.
living under their noses. I’ve lived in Chicago my
clowns, and avoid attracting their attention while
real. Yet I have to go on unnoticed by the Democrat
Republicans are a more distant threat, however
they did. The clowns I face are the Democrats. The
insane Clown Posse endorsed Kamala. Of course
especially sadistic clowns. But which ones, and how?

Messages in a bottle

An introduction to the Walter Held – Max Horkheimer exchange

Lukas Hedderich and Ethan Linehan

WHAT IS THE ROLE of the intellectual in a revolutionary working-class movement? How does the separation of theory from practice affect the development and utility of Marxism? And how did the twin phenomena of the Frankfurt School and Trotskyism succeed — or fail — in addressing the tasks of their historical moment? These are the questions that lie at the heart of Walter Held’s 1939 essay “Critical theory without political practice?”¹

Walter Held (1910–1941), originally named Walter Heinz Epe, was a German Marxist whose political education came in the tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic. In 1932 he was expelled from the Communist Party of Germany for “Trotskyist” sympathies. He fled Germany in 1933 when the Nazis came to power, eventually settling into exile in Norway. While in exile, he served as a secretary and propagandist for the Left Opposition, and in 1933 he joined Trotsky in advocating for the establishment of a new International. Throughout the 1930s, Held labored tirelessly to rally support for the Fourth International among dissident socialists in Northern Europe. Having grown frustrated with the indefinite political inactivity his refugee status imposed upon him in Scandinavia, he first attempted to get to the United States in 1938 but was denied the requisite paperwork for three years. In early 1941, with plans to join the political activities of American Trotskyists, he attempted to cross the Soviet Union by train, intending to reach the Far East and sail across the Pacific, but was detained by border guards and executed at the age of 30.²

In the aforementioned essay, Held takes to task what he perceives as Horkheimer’s reluctance to engage in political practice despite the latter’s profound theoretical insights. Horkheimer reproaches philosophers for failing to move beyond abstract theory to effect real change, yet he himself remains ensconced in abstraction, divorced from the immediate struggles of the day. This inconsistency, according to Held, undermines the emancipatory potential of critical theory. It fails to translate its critical insights into meaningful action, so the accusation goes. The proletariat, despite experiencing the injustice and unfreedom of life under capitalism, automatically possesses neither the correct knowledge of their situation nor the means to transform society. For these, they have need of theoretical guidance and political leadership. But Horkheimer’s separation of the theoretician from the activist leads to a disconnect between theory and practice. Critical theory becomes a methodology that is isolated from the very social forces it aims to liberate. Marxism is made sterile in Horkheimer’s hands by his deferral of political activity. “The radical politician,” Held says, “is the true inheritor of radical philosophy, which is sublated and preserved in him.” It follows, then, that Horkheimer is a reversion to mere philosophizing — a retreat in the heat of battle to ground already captured.

Held holds up Marx and Engels as counterexamples to Horkheimer. Despite their intense theoretical rigor, Marx and Engels were deeply embedded within the working-class movement and sought as participants within it to dialectically relate theory to practice. By idealizing the separation of the two, Horkheimer falls below a level of consciousness previously reached. For Held, Marxism is essentially a guide to action, and the truth of its theories must be verified in practice. In so many words, the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School are encouraged to purge any anti-Marxist tendencies in their own ranks and to become theoreticians for the Fourth International.

The Frankfurt School immediately became aware of Held’s essay. In the summer of its publication, it was disseminated between colleagues at the Institute for Social Research. The scholar Helmut Dahmer suggests that Franz Neumann likely sent it to Leo Löwenthal,³ who passed it on to Horkheimer with an inquiry whether the Held essay should be reproduced in the pages of the *Journal for Social Research*. In a letter to Löwenthal dated July 20, 1939, Max Horkheimer writes, “It seems that we differ greatly when it comes to judging this essay. I think it’s by far the best I’ve ever read about us. It is based on a thorough study of our material. The critical comments, which are spot-on, seem to me to be more of a promotion than a malicious attack. It is precisely because I believe that the publication of this work will arouse interest that I don’t want to publish it.”⁴

Horkheimer’s point would not have been lost on his colleagues, but a century later it is not immediately obvious why he would have received Held’s criticisms so gleefully and at the same time not want them to receive a wider readership. After all, the kinship between Horkheimer and Held is more than theoretical. Practically speaking, Horkheimer’s directorship of the Institute imposed a level of rigor reminiscent of a sectarian Leninist organization. As Detlev Claussen observed in his biography of Adorno, “Right up to and including their individual behavior, the debates among the institute members remind us of the wretched history of radical leftwing organizations. Horkheimer himself had led the institute like a leftwing splinter group after taking over the directorship in 1930, and the same tone was maintained in the radical writings he produced in emigration.”⁵ Even Horkheimer himself half-jokingly said in his inaugural address that his tenure would be a “dictatorship.”⁶

The historically conditioned approach of Horkheimer’s circle is expressed in a piece like “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), a programmatic statement meant to guide the Institute for Social Research. Held’s essay, then, demonstrates his contemporaneous recognition of the Frankfurt School’s complete withdrawal from all pretense of political involvement, which is the legacy of the Frankfurt School as we know it today. After the crisis of World War I and the closing of the revolutionary window of 1917–21, capitalist society reinvented itself. The “administered society” that emerged as the Sisyphean effort to sustain Marxism in theory only. The problem of capitalism had become more diffuse and obscure in Horkheimer’s time than it had been in Marx and Engels’s time (this is exponentially true of our own day and its opacity compared to Horkheimer’s). This is the meaning of a term in critical theory called “regression”: problems are not posed to consciousness either theoretically or practically as acutely as they once were. Every 20th-century radical had the duty to reflect for himself on the difficulties of proceeding straightforwardly from history by building on the basis of the past, without recognizing the deep regression that inevitably throws him back onto preceding tasks. That Held in some sense recognized the impossibility of the Frankfurt School’s task as clearly as they themselves did is remarkable.

The “Trotskyism” of which Held was a partisan was one response to regression; the critical theory of the Frankfurt School was another. Both Trotskyism and the Frankfurt School, then, are products of failure. They continue to be read today because of their lucidity about the stakes of such a monumental defeat that still echoes into the present, and for their valiant efforts to not cede ground theoretically and practically that it took years in the preceding century to gain. Both Trotskyism and the Frankfurt School provide guideposts to the problems posed by Marxism that have been all but obliterated in historical memory. Both traditions claim to preserve Marxism in ways that other tendencies do not. They point back through the historical wreckage to the deeper problems that have been forgotten. They continue to make people uncomfortable because they put their finger on a wound in history that will not heal.

Critical theory, for better or for worse, understood its own state of fragmentation. Most flavors of Trotskyism were less than clear about this. The incomprehension of regression implicates Held’s essay in every line. At the heart of the issue is Held’s assumption that the separation of the theoretician from the activist is a voluntary choice made by individuals, rather than a crisis imposed upon them by the regressed historical situation. It is probable that Horkheimer’s reservations about republishing Held’s essay took into consideration the fact that any efforts to heroically leap over the fissure between theory and practice only entrenches their estrangement. Held threatens to treat “not the real conditions but a mere effort of will as the driving force of the revolution,” a danger of which Marx once accused a minority faction of Communist League members.⁷ Held correctly criticizes someone like Karl Kautsky in his period of renegacy for degrading Marxist theory to vulgar practice instead of elevating practice to the level of theory. But the degradation owing to abstention was matched by the degradation of theory that participation in the political struggle seemed to require by the late 1930s.

Held cannot abide any intellectual that would consider himself above class and party. This is the force behind his reminder that Marx and Engels were simultaneously first-rate theoreticians and members of party activities who disciplined their intellectual contributions to the needs of the party. But he does not see that Horkheimer very much understands his isolation as the double-edged sword that it is. Held also omits the fact that Marx and Engels were not party men in perpetuity. On the contrary, in the early 1850s they consciously and excitedly entered into a period of intense intellectual activity in a moment of profound reaction and defeat. Their declaration that revolution was not imminent earned them scorn from

their comrades and fueled speculations about their commitments to the cause. This is the time in which, as Held derisively puts it, “Marx and Engels also found time to leisurely muse over primitive society, patriarchy, and the history of the family and private property.” The desperation of the late 1930s necessarily meant hostility towards theory, aimed at those who would muse over merely theoretical questions. Marx in his most desperate hour, by contrast, was “firmly convinced that [his] theoretical studies were of greater use to the working class than [his] meddling with associations which had now had their day on the Continent,” associations of parties whose “meetings, resolutions, and transactions . . . since 1852 belong to the realm of fantasy” and of “revolution-mongering.”⁸ Held is not wrong to suggest that the abstention from the political struggle for socialism can result in a degradation in thought. Thinkers may become “deformed,” Adorno says, by their lot in the division between mental and physical labor.⁹ But thinkers cannot “by sheer will abolish” this separate existence imposed on them by contemporary society.¹⁰

Held’s criticism surely infiltrated the consciousness of Horkheimer and Adorno in the very same year, as is clear from their posthumously published notes for a draft of a new *Communist Manifesto* (1848), dated October 25, 1939. There, they bemoaned the gulf between the desire for a subjectivity required for revolution and the undeniable objective possibilities for it: to them, it was not true in 1918 and “is even less true today” that “the world is not yet ripe for socialism.”¹¹ In contemplating their role, they agreed that “it is extremely easy to present what the proletariat would need to do,” because “if the world were not covered by a veil of blindness, the proletariat could immediately set things right.” However, to flatly demand revolution as the goal would amount to “sectarianism.”¹² Rather, they decided that “we must remain outside; we cannot identify ourselves with the proletariat,” an identity which otherwise might dissolve the critical distance needed to be of most use to them.¹³ The next month, in incomplete notes, Adorno claims the following: “Everyone says that Marxism is finished. In contrast, we say, no, it is not finished; rather, we must stay true to it. But if one truly remains faithful to Marxism, that means continuing the dialectical process.”¹⁴ He goes on to add that fidelity to Marxism is the priority. Staying true to theory would be in service to saying what concrete change is needed, as well as to confronting the political and theoretical reification that blocks such change.

Such thoughts remained in the foreground as a continued concern for years to come. Consider, for example, the dialogue between Horkheimer and Adorno from 1956, published as *Towards a New Manifesto*. There, Adorno and Horkheimer worry that the entire rationale for theory seems to have disappeared in part because the party no longer exists; theory’s only use in contemporary politics is to gild “either reformism or quietism.”¹⁵ Horkheimer puzzles whether the political question is still relevant at a time when you cannot act politically and revolution has become such an unlikely prospect.¹⁶ Adorno suggests that to propagate “a communist theory” in such conditions “is really an absurdity,” because its object is “something that no longer exists.”¹⁷ What passes for Marxism in their time “no longer has anything in common with Marx,” or “with the most advanced class consciousness,” because it is “no longer a function of the proletariat.”¹⁸ For such musings, they are well aware that they could be accused of simply being a talk-shop in a world where disasters daily befall mankind that deserved an urgent response. In the intervening years, Horkheimer must have processed Held’s exhortation that the Frankfurt School take a less ambiguous position on the Soviet Union, for he asks Adorno, “What use is a theory that does not tell us how to behave towards the Russians or the United States?”¹⁹ They also concede that to “formulate some guiding political principles today” is completely inappropriate given their lack of intimacy with the politics on the ground.²⁰ They too recognize the disconnect between themselves and Marx, agreeing that they cannot fall back on the concept of practice that was still available to him.

Horkheimer belatedly takes up the pressures from the Helds of the world: “What these people want from us is partly pernicious, partly well-intentioned. It is the belief that the intellectual must be someone who can really help. It is not enough to say ‘I am just thinking . . .’”²¹ Adorno and Horkheimer decide that the intellectual in a moment of reaction and low prospects for change has recourse to working in what they call “a curious waiting process.”²² That is to say, the radical intellectual today finds himself in the position of treating “theory as a message in a bottle,” as a tool to be kept “in stock.”²³ Held says that “the place of the theorist is at the head of the revolutionary party”; here, Lenin and the Bolsheviks are the clear contrast with Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. Recognizing their dire straits, but also recognizing the opportunity to leverage the absence of a politics that could really change the world, Adorno reminds his colleague that “when Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* there was no party either. It is not always necessary to join up with something already in existence.”²⁴ Both are optimistic that the time will come again when theory can be of use if only the “breathing space” for critical reflection can stave off the reifying pressures to act for action’s sake.²⁵ In a twist that Held would no doubt have appreciated, Horkheimer says the claim that new constellations of political activity not beholden to the old rot are possible “has echoes of Trotsky.”²⁶

The merit of Held’s intervention is its demonstration that in the 1930s it was clear to both Trotskyists and the Frankfurt School they speak the same mutually intelligible language and descend from the same tradition. In stark contrast, today’s heirs of these traditions are incapable of understanding one another. Academics broadly aligned with critical theory frequently deny any connection to a more explicitly Leninist politics, while sectarians with Marxist roots dismiss critical theory as irrelevant or disconnected from Marxism. The latter are likely to echo Held’s polemic on this score, which, in one of the earliest known critiques of academicism in the Frankfurt

School, pillories the critical theorist who “fails to shed the skin of the bourgeois professor” and “remains in the clouds of philosophy.” Held accuses the editors of and contributors to the *Journal for Social Research* of placing “greater value on abstract methods than on engaging with the concrete issues of the present,” arguing instead that “Marxist philosophy is essentially a guide to action.” What can be observed clearly in this chastisement is that the actionist critique of mere theorizing that we associate with Stalinism and Maoism in the 1960s is actually a *repetition* of the critique of those who stepped out of the line of fire in the 1930s, the very period when Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique was first formulated.

The crux of an intervention like Held’s is this: can we accept that the link between theory and practice, which formerly could be taken for granted, has, for some time now, been severed? What if, for the time being, Marxism is only able to be a guide to thought and not action? Does that render Marxism useless? On the contrary, perhaps it is as Horkheimer suggests, that even if the party no longer exists, the fact that the preservers of critical thought are here still has a certain value.²⁷ The practitioners of critical theory, whom Held criticized for their failure to connect theory to practice, clung to the hope that “even if [their] theory doesn’t directly feed into practice, and even if the link with practice is utterly opaque, it will nevertheless benefit practice somehow or other.”²⁸ Despite the highly mediated relationship between intellectuals and the proletariat, “it might become evident much later,” Horkheimer wrote, “that some of their ideas, as well as their memory of the materialist stance aiming at a free humanity, are not entirely worthless.”²⁹ It remains worthwhile to consider bourgeois problems of art, literature, and philosophy, “even where their connection to the question of revolution is entirely opaque” because “what comes out of this need not be lost.”³⁰

The included essay by Held is the fruit of a collaborative effort. Lukas Hedderich undertook the lion’s share of the work, performing the initial rough translation from German into English. Ethan Linehan then refined the draft, improving its readability and the conveyance of the author’s meaning into the target language. Where Held references Horkheimer, some quotes are available in well-known English translations, while others required our own translation. In the original text, Held underscores two quotes from Horkheimer as especially important, which have been duly noted. Contextual footnotes are included for figures of lesser renown. Special gratitude is offered to Spencer Leonard for reading a draft of our translation. It was greatly improved by his comments. Any remaining issues are our own.

By making this work accessible to an English-speaking readership, we are facilitating a broader understanding of the foundational debates in Marxism and encouraging a re-examination of the fraught relationship between Trotskyism and the Frankfurt School. But this historical document is not only of archival significance. Held’s is a critique that remains relevant today because the disconnection between theory and practice persists. Grappling with the import of Marx’s 11th thesis is a challenge that remains as urgent today as it was in Held’s time. **|P**

Title page of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7

¹ Translated into English and included in this issue.

² For more, see Pierre Broué’s biographical note, *Revolutionary History* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1988), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/1930s/held01.htm>.

³ Helmut Dahmer, *Freud, Trotzki und der Horkheimer-Kreis* (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2019), 492.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, Letter 481, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, *Briefwechsel 1937–1940* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1995), 618ff; Dahmer, Freud, Trotzki und der Horkheimer-Kreis, 490–92 [our translation].

⁵ Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 223.

⁶ Max Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research” (1931), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, trans. G. Frederick Hunter, et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 11.

⁷ Karl Marx, “Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne” (1853), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 11 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 402–03.

⁸ Karl Marx, “Letter to Ferdinand Freiligrath, February 29, 1860,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 82–84.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, “Resignation” (1969), in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 289.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Max Horkheimer, “Diskussionen über Sprache und Erkenntnis, Naturbeherrschung am Menschen, politische Aspekte Des Marxismus,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, *Nachgelassene Schriften 1931–1949* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987), 514 [our translation].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 524.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2019), 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

²⁰ Ibid., 43.

²¹ Ibid., 60.

²² Ibid., 62.

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁹ Max Horkheimer, “Bürgerliche Welt,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, 332 [our translation].

³⁰ Ibid.

Critical theory without political practice?

An evaluation of the *Journal for Social Research*

Walter Held

The following is a translation, by Lukas Hedderich and Ethan Linehan, of Walter Held's "Kritische Theorie ohne politische Praxis? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung" (1939).¹

COMPARED TO THE DULL GRAYNESS of the émigré press — as seen from Thomas and Heinrich Mann to Brecht and Feuchtwanger, from Georg Bernhard to Hart and Hiller, as well as from Stampfer to Walcher, Münzenberg and Pieck² — which is just an expression of general intellectual stagnation and rottenness, the *Journal for Social Research*, edited by Max Horkheimer and commissioned by the Institute for Social Research, compares favorably. The contributions to the *Journal*, except for a few which will be discussed later, all excel in academic quality and accuracy. Horkheimer's own articles are of particular interest. He is eager to oppose reactionary philosophical movements — irrationalism, neo-empiricism, neo-humanism — equipped with the tools of dialectical materialism, which he also terms "critical theory."

Philosophy and politics

However — and this is where our critique begins — this educated philosopher and expert in Marxist doctrine always remains at the level of abstract philosophizing. This is especially concerning because often he explicitly confronts in others what are his own shortcomings. For example, in his excellent critique of "the philosopher of the Popular Front" Siegfried Marck,³ he states that "philosophy, which calls itself political, has long since turned into the critique of political economy,"⁴ a paraphrase of Marx's famous words, according to which the philosophers have already sufficiently interpreted the world, whereas now the point is to change it and to realize philosophy. The Institute, however, is far from any practice that would correspond with this insight. If radical philosophy has transformed into the critique of political economy and the realm of abstract philosophizing is left to sophisticated imitators, then it follows that the radical politician is the true inheritor of radical philosophy, which is sublated and preserved in him. But it is exactly this point that Horkheimer is unwilling to take, insofar as he holds onto the need for a separate existence of the philosopher. In the aforementioned polemic against Marck, he states that "The fear of isolation, which in certain phases of action may understandably determine the politician's actions, should not concern the philosopher."⁵ In an earlier essay,⁶ he tries more fundamentally to differentiate between the tasks of the politician on the one hand, and the philosopher, or "critical theorist," on the other. In the following, we will show how Horkheimer correctly articulates the theoretical point of departure but draws the wrong conclusions from it. We begin by identifying the common ground.

Theory and class consciousness

But it must be added that even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge. The proletariat may indeed have experience of meaninglessness in the form of continuing and increasing wretchedness and injustice in its own life. Yet this awareness is prevented from becoming a social force by the differentiation of social structure which is still imposed on the proletariat from above and by the opposition between personal class interests which is transcended only at very special moments. Even to the proletariat the world superficially seems quite different than it really is. Even an outlook which could grasp that no opposition really exists between the proletariat's own true interests and those of society as a whole, and would therefore derive its principles of action from the thoughts and feelings of the masses, would fall into slavish dependence on the status quo. The intellectual is satisfied to proclaim with reverent admiration the creative strength of the proletariat and finds satisfaction in adapting himself to it and in canonizing it. He fails to see that such an evasion of theoretical effort (which the passivity of his own thinking spares him) and of temporary opposition to the masses (which active theoretical effort on his part might force upon him) only makes the masses blinder and weaker than they need be. His own thinking should in fact be a critical, promotive factor in the development of the masses. When he wholly accepts the present psychological state of that class which, objectively considered, embodies the power to change society, he has the happy feeling of being linked with an immense force and enjoys a professional optimism. When the optimism is shattered in periods of crushing defeat, many intellectuals risk falling into a pessimism about society and a nihilism which are just as ungrounded as their exaggerated optimism had been. They cannot bear the thought that the kind of thinking which is most topical, which has the deepest grasp of the historical situation, and is most pregnant with the future, must at certain times isolate its subject and throw him back upon himself.⁷

That is all excellent and completely true. However, the historically unavoidable, temporary isolation of thought from the masses — of thought that is most acute at grasping the historical situation most adequately — is not opposed to the most strictly organized centralization and cooperation of the bearers of thought, but on the contrary makes exactly such organization absolutely necessary. At times, defeat can go so deep that even the most advanced party can fall apart, and individual bearers of revolutionary thought are left to fend for themselves. This, however, does not allow them to abandon the concept of the party. From the first moment of isolation, they must put all their efforts into re-establishing the party anew in its most advanced form and do all that is necessary to achieve this goal. In Horkheimer's case, however, there seems to be a necessary, permanent contradiction between the avant-garde thinker and the vanguard party.⁸

Similarly, a systematic presentation of the contents of proletarian consciousness cannot provide a true picture of proletarian existence and interests. It would yield only an application of traditional theory to a specific problem, and not the intellectual side of the historical process of proletarian emancipation. The same would be true if one were to limit oneself to appraising and making known the ideas not of the proletariat in general but of some more advanced sector of the proletariat, for example a party or its leadership. The real task set here would be the registering and classifying of facts with the help of the most suitable conceptual apparatus, and the theoretician's ultimate goal would be the prediction of future socio-psychological phenomena. Thought and the formation of theory would be one thing and its object, the proletariat, another. If, however, the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges. The course of the conflict between the advanced sectors of the class and the individuals who speak out the truth concerning it, as well as of the conflict between the most advanced sectors with their theoreticians and the rest of the class, is to be understood as a process of interactions in which consciousness comes to flower along with its liberating but also its aggressive forces which incite while also requiring discipline. The sharpness of the conflict shows in the ever-present possibility of tension between the theoretician and the class which his thinking is to serve. The unity of the social forces which promise liberation is at the same time their distinction (in Hegel's sense); it exists only as a conflict which continually threatens the subjects caught up in it. *This truth becomes clearly evident in the person of the theoretician; he exercises an aggressive critique not only against the conscious defenders of the status quo but also against distracting, conformist, or utopian tendencies within his own household.*⁹

Theory and praxis for Marx and Engels

Even so brilliantly formulated, the cited passage clearly shows that, despite recognizing its limits, Horkheimer upholds a historically outdated Western European concept of the workers' party. The workers' party in this traditional sense, which limited itself to a systematic presentation of the contents of the consciousness in the advanced industrial proletariat, probably found its highest historical expression in the party of Bebel. That conception has collapsed without a future in the tremendous crises of our epoch. Horkheimer's formulation of the interrelationship between theorist, party, and class evidently has in mind the historical position that Marx and Engels took towards Bebel's social democracy. Bebel and Liebknecht were tasked with the problems of political practice and the organizational leadership of the party, while Marx and Engels were in London devoting themselves to the development of theory. But it never occurred to Marx and Engels to idealize this situation the way Horkheimer does, as it was forced upon them. They never understood themselves as theorists with their heads in the clouds, serving the workers' movement only from the high vantage point of theory and leaving the mundane organizational tasks to the philistines. This can be proven by looking at their practical involvement in the Revolution of 1848 and their participation in the General Council of the First International. But even during their forced isolation after the collapse of the First International, they remained in constant connection with the workers' movement on the Continent, and especially with the German party. They always tried, albeit only rarely with success, to influence the politics of the party and enlighten its practice with their theory. They were always ready to pause their theoretical work if the situation allowed or required them to jump with both feet into practical politics.

For Kautsky

Marx and Engels could not both actively participate in the class struggle and assume a position of leadership at the head of the party. So, the former was left to the "pragmatists,"¹⁰ which in their second generation — as Horkheimer rightly says — already considered Marxist theory to be a mere quirk. The legacy of theory fell to Kautsky, who in this respect, as in all others, was a poor disciple. Instead of establishing the unity of theory and practice in a higher form as would have been necessary with the beginning of the new phase of the imperialist epoch, instead of elevating practice to the level of theory, he degraded theory to the level of exiting vulgar practice. He played the same role that August Thalheimer later did in the Communist Party.¹¹ Thalheimer was just an even weaker disciple of Kautsky.

For Lenin

The task that Kautsky and the entire German movement, including Luxemburg and Liebknecht, failed to recognize and address was recognized and addressed by Lenin. Already at the dawn of the century, he opposed a critical conception of the party to the traditional one. The practice of the party must accord with revolutionary theory, and the place of the theorist is at the head of the revolutionary party. The task of the party is not to systematically present the contents of the consciousness of the proletariat, but to *transform* them using revolutionary theory. The radical theorist without political organization remains powerless; a political organization without revolutionary theory necessarily perishes. The unity of *both* is required for victory.

For Horkheimer

Unlike Lenin, Horkheimer does not go beyond Marx and Engels, but falls far below them. The task

appears as a spontaneous process that can only succeed through the organized effort of the theorists. It is not the isolated theorist but the organized vanguard that can win the fight against the apologists for the status quo, as well as against the distracting, conformist, utopian, or treacherous tendencies in one's own ranks. Unfortunately, Horkheimer fails to shed the skin of the bourgeois professor. Despite his acceptance and mastery of materialist dialectics, he remains in the clouds of philosophy, where he only fights theory's sophisticated imitators in respectable but insignificant duels, without daring to return to the earth. While in *theory*, he affirms the necessity of the unity of theory and practice, he fails to uphold the same in *practice*. Even the most severe crises of our epoch — the rise to power of National Socialism, the decay of the Soviet Union, the Spanish Civil War — were not enough to prompt Horkheimer to modify his political stance. Strangely enough, since he fully understands the importance of taking a position on such events, as is clear from his essay "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy":

At present, certain fundamental insights into the essence of society are more decisive for the truth of an overall view than the possession or lack of extensive specialized knowledge. *In these fundamental insights themselves, the most apparently trivial shadings are crucial.*¹² The boundary that one could draw today between human beings with respect to the weight of their knowledge would thus be oriented less to the extent of their academic training than to certain features of their behavior, in which are expressed their stance toward social struggles.¹³

But if critical theory comes to such deep insights when confronting its enemies, then its first duty should be to define its own position on social struggles and to do so as concretely as possible — since the apparently trivial shadings are so crucial. In his polemical annihilation of the hardly sophisticated philosopher Marck, Horkheimer comes quite close to such a concrete statement on political issues, and it is precisely for this reason that we regard his work with renewed interest. He clearly shows himself as an opponent of the Popular Front, and he rightly points out that, in today's world, the hope for humanity is to be found more in concentration camps than in any neo-humanist or anti-fascist meetings. And in response to the demand for a "Second Republic," he states:

Even those who personally have every reason to do so should not wish for a repetition. The worst horrors of today do not originate in 1933, but in 1919 when workers and intellectuals were shot by feudal accomplices of the First Republic. The socialist governments were powerless. Instead of reaching out to their political base, they preferred to remain on the shaky ground of established facts. They did not truly believe that theory was more than a mere quirk. The government made freedom a political philosophy rather than a political practice.¹⁴

Sentences like this resonate deeply with us, but one would think that an insight like this entails the duty of committing to a specific political program that clearly distinguishes one's own position from all others and imposes on oneself the duty of combatting those tendencies that have become "a matter of interest only to their own bureaucracy."¹⁵

The *Journal for Social Research* and the Soviet Union

Sadly, the *Journal* not only fails to develop a consistent political program, but it even sins against its own abstract programmatic guidelines. These the editorial team set for itself in the preface to the sixth volume, where we are promised the maintenance of certain ideas and the development and application of a unified philosophical perspective. But the *Journal's* stance on such a significant contemporary phenomenon as the Soviet Union remains very ambiguous. While Horkheimer's works suggests a profound recognition of the reactionary turn in the Soviet Union, the *Journal's* specialist in Soviet Russian literature helplessly confronts the disgusting eclecticism of Soviet jurists like Vyshinsky,¹⁶ whose writings are no more than banal apologies for Stalin's cynical practices. He fails to see that defending the fervently written work by Pashukanis,¹⁷ *The General Theory of Law and Marxism* (1924), would be a task for the *Journal for Social Research* if it wished to stay true to its declared goals. Likewise, the miserable tome by the old Webbs,¹⁸ *Soviet Communism* (1935), an uncritical compilation of sources from official Russian propaganda without a trace of independent scientific thought, was praised to the skies in the *Journal*. Should one really value a vague friendship with Stalin more than staying true to certain ideas?

K. A. Wittfogel, Asian society, and the Moscow Trials

One of the contributors to the *Journal for Social Research* is Karl August Wittfogel,¹⁹ who specializes in the study of Asian society and has published several very interesting papers on this topic for the *Journal*. Until recently, Wittfogel was a politically active Stalinist. In Germany, he publicly defended both the so-called "theories" of social fascism and of socialism in one country, neither of which is in the spirit of social research, but only of social demagoguery. Both had the effect of weakening the working class and preparing the way for Hitler's victory. We have no evidence to this day that Wittfogel has in any way disavowed Stalinism. Certainly, the scientific study of Asian society is more honorable than, for example, defending the Moscow Trials and their counterpart, the Popular Front. But the value of such work is no excuse for failing to participate in present struggles. Marx and Engels also found time to leisurely muse over primitive society, patriarchy, and the history of the family and private property, but they always managed to combine such studies with deep analysis of contemporary questions and to lay open the path to the future. Marxism treated as an escape from the present is indeed the most grotesque of all kinds of Marxism yet formulated. But exactly this seems to have found a home in the Institute for Social Research.

Conclusions

The editors and contributors of the *Journal for Social Research* seem to place greater value on abstract methods than on engaging with the concrete issues

of the present. But Marxist philosophy is essentially a guide to action. In one of Horkheimer's essays, there is the insightful sentence, tested a thousand times by historical experience in recent decades: "Indifference to the idea in theory is the precursor of cynicism in practical life."²⁰ But this statement needs a supplement: abstaining from practice leads to sterility in theory. The only criterion for the truth of Marxist theory is its verification in practice. If critical theory does not wish to regress into a mindless distraction for sophisticated imitators, then it must engage in political practice. **IP**

¹ The text first appeared in *Unser Wort* 7, no. 6/7 (97/98) (June/July 1939): 5–6. It is also available in Helmut Dahmer, *Freud, Trotzki und der Horkheimer-Kreis* (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2019), 480–89. See the translators' introduction to the text in this issue.

² Thomas Mann (1875–1955), Heinrich Mann (1871–1950), Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), Lion Feuchtwanger (1884–1958), Georg Bernhard (1875–1944), Herbert Arthur Hart (1907–92), Kurt Hiller (1885–1972), Friedrich Stampfer (1874–1957), Jakob Walcher (1887–1970), Willi Münzenberg (1889–1940), and Wilhelm Pieck (1876–1960) were German writers, journalists, and activists in the Popular Front against fascism.

³ Siegfried Marck (1889–1957), a German philosopher who joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany following WWI. He fled to America as fascism came to power.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, "Die Philosophie der absoluten Konzentration," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7, no. 3 (1938): 385 [our translation].

⁵ Ibid., 387.

⁶ Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937), in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 188–243.

[Endnotes 7–20 available online]

"1914 redux," continued from page 2

Did he want Palestinian suffering to continue, in other words, so as to inspire the larger Muslim masses?

If so, it's hard to see how Hamas can be seen as a resistance organization at all. After all, what kind of resistance seeks to goad the enemy into raining down destruction on its own people?

Certainly, few regarded the Black Hand as part of the resistance during World War I since better than 50% of Serbia's troops ended up dying as a consequence of the conflict it helped initiate along with some 27% of the Serbian population as a whole.³⁶ That's better than 16 times the current rate in Gaza. This is why the Pašić government wound up putting three of its top leaders up against a wall in 1917 and shooting them for treason. They had ushered in catastrophe and therefore had to pay the price.

Will Hamas suffer the same fate? Left-wing apologists for Hamas are on the wrong side of history. Instead of combatting national chauvinism, they are calling it progressive and lining up behind it. Not only are they covering up for Hamas's crimes against Israeli civilians, they are covering up for its even greater crimes against Palestinians. 40,000 dead, millions made homeless, entire cities reduced to dust and rubble — these are all-too-predictable byproducts of Hamas adventurism.

Instead of Hamas, our heroes should be Dragiša Lapčević and Triša Kaclerović, Serbian socialists who voted against war credits as war was erupting in July 1914. "We are being called to war," Lapčević told the Serbian parliament, "knowing that our government has failed to take the necessary measures to avoid it." After its victorious war against Turkey in 1912, he went on, the government had failed to work for a united federation of Balkan peoples. Instead it had engaged in a fratricidal war against Bulgaria, suppressed Albanians, and drifted into "slavish dependence on St. Petersburg and the Paris stock exchange." It had tolerated the intrigues of chauvinist secret organizations such as the Black Hand, which were responsible for killing the heir to the Austrian throne and thus generating the crisis. Lapčević reminded parliament of how the Austrian Social Democrats had fought in parliament and the streets in favor of Serbian independence and how they had protested "this very day as one man" against military conflict. "It is with pride and with full praise for the proletariat of Austria-Hungary that we Serbian Social Democrats here proclaim that there must be no war between the peoples of Austria-Hungary and the Serbian people." He and Kaclerović were the only two members of parliament to vote against mobilization.³⁷

These are people we should emulate, not paragliding thugs who shoot down innocent people at random. Israel and the U.S. are to blame regardless of whether the Gaza war ignites a wider conflagration or merely continues in a relatively limited fashion. But so are Hamas and its legions of western apologists. National chauvinism is even less excusable in 2024 than it was in 1914. **IP**

¹ Social Democratic Party of Germany.

² Perry Anderson's forthcoming book, *Disputing Disaster: A Sextet on the Great War* (London: Verso, 2024), is an interesting guide to the history wars.

³ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Allen Lane, 2012), 456.

⁴ Ibid., 408, 456, 498–99.

⁵ Caitlin Johnstone, "Dancing Outside The Concentration Camp" (April 6, 2024), <https://caityjohnstone.medium.com/dancing-outside-the-concentration-camp-f4b302243acf>.

⁶ Norman Finkelstein, "John Brown's Body—in Gaza" (October 7, 2023), <https://www.normanfinkelstein.com/john-browns-body-in-gaza/>.

⁷ [Hebrew] Plural of *kibbutznik*, a member of a *kibbutz*, a gathering, a community, etc.

⁸ Charlie Kimber, "Rejoice as Palestinian resistance humiliates racist Israel," and "Palestinian speaks out, 'We're rewriting history,'" *Socialist Worker* 2876 (October 11–17, 2023), 3–4, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/issue2876.pdf>.

⁹ Alex Lantier, " Netanyahu regime staggered by Palestinian uprising," *World Socialist Web Site* (October 7, 2023), <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/10/08/wkem-o08.html>.

[Endnotes 10–37 available online]

1914 redux

Why the Left gets Hamas wrong . . . and U.S. imperialism too

Daniel Lazare

IF TODAY’S ATOMIZED Marxist Left agrees on anything, it is the disastrous consequences of the Second International’s failure to mobilize against war in 1914. Instead of banding together against militarism, socialists rushed to defend bourgeois states they had previously pledged to destroy. They all had their reasons. The Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands’ claimed to be fighting czarist tyranny. French socialists claimed to be fighting German militarism. The British Labour Party said it was defending “plucky little Belgium” against German troops trampling its neutrality underfoot. But it was all nonsense. Casting international working-class solidarity to the winds, the various parties put their own national interests first, not to mention their own imperial interests too.

The result was four years of industrialized slaughter in which 10 million people were killed, 14 million seriously wounded, and seven million permanently disabled — a slaughter so horrendous that anyone calling him- or herself a revolutionary Marxist vows never to fall into the same trap again. Yet that is precisely what today’s depleted Marxist movement is doing with regard to Gaza. The circumstances are different since imperialism has evolved in countless ways since 1914. But the political failures are the same: a surrender to national chauvinism, shallow partisanship, and an avoidance of anything resembling clear-eyed political analysis. So far, the Palestinians are mainly paying the price for this colossal blunder. But the wider the conflict spreads, the greater the likelihood that others will be dragged in as well.

Where has the Left gone wrong? Just about everywhere although Hamas is the most obvious place to begin. While hailed as part of the anti-Zionist “resistance,” it is playing the same game that far-Right Serbian nationalists played in 1914. These were the people who triggered World War I by killing Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo. For decades, international politics required that Germany and Austria take the lion’s share of the blame for the debacle, and so historians dutifully downplayed Serbia’s role while accusing Austria of attempting to bully its smaller neighbor into submission.² This was also nonsense. In fact, the conspiracy reached into the highest levels of the Serbian government, mobs were cheering the assassination in the streets, and when the Austrians demanded that the Serbs come clean about their involvement, Belgrade brushed them off. The strategy of the Serbian ultra-nationalists was clear. After nearly doubling their territory in the Second Balkan War of 1913, their goal was to expand it even more by provoking a confrontation with Vienna that they thought they could win by bringing their fellow Slav, Czar Nicholas II of Russia, in on their side.

Christopher Clark’s 2012 best-seller, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, has done much to overturn this long-standing anti-Austrian consensus. His point was not that Serbs caused the war in any simple or straightforward manner since tinder had been piling up for decades. But they unquestionably lit the match. As *Sleepwalkers* puts it:

The Serbian state — or at least the statesmen who directed it — accepted responsibility for the eventual “reunion” of all Serbs, including those living within the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy. This implied at best a limited acknowledgement of the empire’s sovereign rights within the unredeemed lands of “Serbdom.” Then there was the fact that the Serbian state under [Prime Minister Nikola] Pašić could exercise only very limited control over the irredentist networks. The interpenetration of the conspiratorial networks with the Serbian state, and the transnational affiliations of ethnic irredentism made a nonsense of any attempt to understand the friction between Serbia and Austria-Hungary in terms of an interaction between sovereign territorial states.³

What this means in plain English is that the Serbian government could not control the ultra-nationalists because it ultimately agreed with their goal, which was to detach chunks of Austro-Hungary peopled by their fellow Serbs and add them to their own.

Fast forward to 2024, and we can see the same dynamics at work in Israel–Palestine. Instead of the ultra-Rightists of the “Black Hand,” the secret military society in Belgrade that masterminded the 1914 assassinations, we have the ultra-Rightists of Hamas. Instead of Russia, we have the broader Middle East, which Hamas is also seeking to drag into the conflict. In 1914, an international chorus was bent on whitewashing the Serbs. A Russian diplomat named Nicholas Hartwig assured his government that Austria was in the wrong, a leading French diplomat named Raymond Poincaré accused it of violating Serbia’s “human rights,” while “first sea lord” Winston Churchill denounced Austria’s call for an honest and objective inquiry into the assassination as “the most insolent document of its kind ever devised.”⁴

Today, we have a similar chorus of tweeters, bloggers, peace activists, and the like accusing Israel of responsibility for much, if not most, of the atrocities on October 7 or, failing that, declaring that Israelis had it coming due to their country’s vicious ethnic policies. This goes even for the 364 young people whom airborne Hamas gunmen massacred at an all-night rave. As one apologist versified all too predictably:

Twerking outside the open-air prison.
Raving while Gaza asphyxiates.
Twirling glow sticks while a Final Solution is planned.
Just an innocent bit of fun.⁵

They deserved it because they were dancing too close to the Gaza border. Or, as the anti-Zionist critic Norman Finkelstein put it a few hours after the killing spree, the victims were guilty of belonging to an unjust society and therefore had to suffer the wrath of the oppressed: “I, for one, will never begrudge — on the contrary, it warms every fiber of my soul — the scenes of Gaza’s smiling children as their arrogant Jewish supremacist oppressors have, finally, been humbled. The stars above in heaven are looking kindly down. Glory, glory, hallelujah. The souls of Gaza go marching on!”⁶

Bloodthirsty rhetoric of this sort is closer to fascism than to anything else. Instead of bourgeois governments, it blames the people — ravers, *kibbutznikim*,⁷ day laborers, etc. — who got caught up in the melee. But what was even more startling was to see revolutionary socialist parties that claim to have absorbed the lessons of 1914 echoing the same line. The Socialist Workers Party (UK), the largest self-described Marxist party in Britain, went public with a headline declaring, “Rejoice as Palestinian resistance humiliates racist Israel,” and quoted an unnamed Gaza resident as saying: “All of us are proud. Today was a rewriting of history — our history. I can hear the bombing now. . . . We are watching what we thought would never, in our lifetime, happen. . . . But I think that for the first time in history — well at least since after 1973 — our fighters have taken the initiative. It proved and showed how weak Israel’s apartheid regime is.”⁸

The *World Socialist Web Site*, which bills itself as “the most widely read Marxist-socialist internet-based publication in the world,” hailed October 7 as “an uprising of the Palestinian people against the violent and brutally oppressive Israeli occupation”⁹ and compared it to the Nat Turner slave uprising in 1831.¹⁰

A leading member of the Communist Party of Great Britain — which, despite the name, has no connection with the original CPGB¹¹ — declared a day after October 7 that Marxists “side with” Hamas while another top member hailed Hamas as “heroic” in a private communication.¹²

A group calling itself the Revolutionary Communist International,¹³ followers of the late Trotskyist leader Ted Grant, saluted Hamas for its derring-do: “From a merely military point of view, the attack was a success. The unexpected Blitzkrieg caught the much-vaunted Israeli intelligence services completely by surprise. Well-armed groups of commandos penetrated Israel’s defenses, breaking through what was supposed to be an impregnable line and inflicting severe losses on Israeli forces.”¹⁴

All of which was either juvenile, misleading, or absurd. If the Grantites knew anything about military history, they would know that surprise attacks like October 7 are not uncommon. Pancho Villa caught the Americans flat-footed when he shot up a New Mexico border town in 1916, the Japanese did the same at Pearl Harbor, Egypt and Syria caught Israel short with a surprise attack in 1973, while Ukraine caught Russia off guard when it launched its Kursk incursion this summer. What matters in such operations is not what happens on day one, but what happens after — and from this perspective, given the subsequent devastation visited on Gaza, it is plain that Hamas’s “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation was one of the greatest military defeats in history, an “own goal” of unprecedented proportions.

As for Nat Turner, there is a vast difference between an uprising by slaves driven mad by oppression and a military assault by a modern political party flush with Persian Gulf cash. Describing October 7 as “an uprising of the Palestinian people” is dangerous because it equates the Palestinian masses with the actions of a Right-wing military elite, which is rather like equating the German working class with the SS. “Heroic” is also mistaken. The OED defines “hero” as someone “who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” Yet the brutal gunmen of October 7 were no more noble than the hijackers of 9/11.

Not all Marxists got it wrong. A rival wing of the Ted Grant family, the UK Socialist Party,¹⁵ noted that Leftists “can give no support to Hamas and Hezbollah, parties which are based on right-wing political Islam,” and that the only way forward is “through democratically organizing mass struggle – a socialist intifada – based on the interests of workers and the poor.”¹⁶ The Internationalist Group, a branch of the Spartacist “family” here in the U.S., observed that “indiscriminate terror . . . is not striking at the Zionist occupation machine but a random assault on Israelis that undermines the defense of the Palestinian people. Such a *jihad* (holy war) is the method of right-wing nationalists and religious zealots, such as the Islamists of Hamas.”¹⁷

A small and somewhat nutty Australian group known as the Workers League — part of the pandemic-skeptic Left, it opposes the lockdown and refers to COVID-19 as “an alleged illness”¹⁸ — has nonetheless been spot-on in explaining why Hamas was bound to fail:

Israeli workers must be convinced that Zionism is not, and can never, benefit them. Yet obviously, the taking of hostages, suicide bombings, and other purely military attacks are totally counter-productive and will only drive Israelis deeper behind their own government and their own state . . . To even begin to reach out to Israeli workers, Palestinians must reject Hamas and even dismantle it. In addition, all the armed groups which utilise innocent life taking terror – whether secular, Stalinist or Islamist – must likewise be disassembled. A military only strategy is one of total defeat.¹⁹

Quite right. If international proletarian solidarity is the goal, then slaughtering hundreds of workers because of their religion or nationality is a less-than-ideal way of

achieving it. All it does is arouse the fury of the Zionist war machine and unite the working masses behind it.

So how do we unpack the ongoing disaster that is Gaza? In classic Marxist fashion, it is by taking a page from Lenin and beginning with the problem of imperialism and its evolving nature. In 1914, Europe was divided up among a half-dozen imperial powers of roughly equal size and weight: Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottomans, who sided with the Central Powers. Today, there is only one imperial power, the United States, along with its subordinates in NATO and AUKUS.²⁰ Opposing it to varying degrees are Russia, China, Iran, and a few others, a motley crew consisting of one deformed workers’ state (to use the classic Trotskyist classification) plus others that are neo-czarist, theocratic, Third World nationalist, or simply incompetent like the Maduro regime in Venezuela. But until recently, the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is a part, was not among the “outs.” To the contrary, it worked closely with the U.S. during the Cold War in battling communists and radical nationalists like Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, Syria’s Hafez al-Assad, and, more recently, al-Assad’s son Bashar, the current Syrian president. It also maintained close relations with Turkey, a NATO member, and Qatar, a close U.S. ally that hosts the Al Udeid Air Base, the largest American military installation in the Middle East.

But if anyone thinks that working closely with the U.S. somehow confers “moderation,” they should think again. Gilbert Achcar, a prominent member of a branch of the Fourth International known as the United Secretariat, pointed out in his path-blazing 2009 book *The Arabs and the Holocaust*, that that the “fundamentalist counterreformation” that culminated in the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 “was far more reactionary than its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic predecessor”²¹ — a pronouncement of fairly breathtaking proportions considering that the Catholic counter-reformation executed the free thinker Giordano Bruno in 1600 and silenced Galileo in 1633 for maintaining that the Earth revolves around the sun. In addition to Quranic literalism, the Muslim Brotherhood embraced anti-Semitism and the Third Reich. If Rommel’s Afrika Korps had broken through at El Alamein in 1942 and advanced on British-occupied Egypt, there is not the slightest doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood would have welcomed them as liberators.

Still, the U.S. needed the Muslim Brotherhood’s help in the 1950s and got it. So did Israel in the 1980s in its efforts to build up an Islamist counterweight to the supposedly more radical Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, had looked to European anti-Semites for assistance since they wanted Jews to leave just as much as he did. He thus wrote that quitting the Diaspora would mean not only liberating Jews from Christians, but liberating Christians too, “liberating them from us.”²² Herzl’s Israeli successors gravitated to anti-Semitic Muslim fundamentalists out of the same ideological affinity, which is why they allowed Qatar to supply Hamas with suitcases of cash. Besides, with the Palestinian National Authority, successor to the PLO, in control of the West Bank, bolstering Hamas in Gaza made sense. “Anyone who wants to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state needs to support strengthening Hamas,” Netanyahu told a Likud gathering. “This is part of our strategy to divide the Palestinians between those in Gaza and those in Judea and Samaria.”²³

In 1988, Hamas released a “covenant” spelling out its views in detail. Jihad and anti-Semitism were front and center.²⁴ It quoted classic Islamic *hadiths*, or sayings, calling for the destruction of the Jews and, like the larger Muslim Brotherhood, relied heavily on the notorious document known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903) for its description of Judaism as a force bent on world conquest.

“With their money,” the covenant declared,

they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution [and] the Communist revolution . . . With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests. . . . They were behind World War I, when they were able to destroy the Islamic Caliphate, making financial gains and controlling resources. They obtained the Balfour Declaration, formed the League of Nations through which they could rule the world. They were behind World War II, through which they made huge financial gains by trading in armaments, and paved the way for the establishment of their state.²⁵

It was all there — Jews playing both sides of the net as capitalists and communists, controlling the press, running the banks, and so forth. But what was most striking was the covenant’s retrograde quality. Who in this day and age describes Rotary and Lions Clubs as conspiratorial agents? Who quotes a 19th-century forgery that has been debunked a dozen times over? To be sure, Hamas issued a statement of “general principles and policies” in 2017 that struck a very different chord by declaring that Hamas’s “conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion.”²⁶

But it was still a muddle. If it were not anti-Semitic now, did that mean it had been in the past? Unfortunately, a senior Hamas official named Mahmoud al-Zahar added to the confusion by informing Reuters that the 1988 covenant was still valid.²⁷ Hamas was now both pro- and anti-Semitic. Either it was lying or merely confused.

Hamas’s ideological shortcomings left it ill-equipped to deal with the complicated political battles ahead. Jihad was its be-all and end-all, the only thing it knew and the only weapon in its arsenal. After sending out dozens of suicide bombers between 1994 and 2005, it settled into a pattern of tit-for-tat violence in which it would fire off volleys of rockets, hunker down in the event of an Israeli counterattack, and then fire off still more. In November 2008, for example, Israel raided

Hamas fighters in the town of Deir al-Balah as they were allegedly tunneling under the Israeli border a few hundred yards away. Hamas responded with rockets, which led Israel to launch a combined air-and-ground assault known as Operation Cast Lead that left as many as 1,400 Palestinians dead. After Hamas gunmen killed three Israeli teenagers in the occupied West Bank in 2014, Israel rounded up hundreds of alleged Hamas operatives, leading to another round of Hamas rocket fire and another Israeli air-and-ground assault. November 2018 saw a botched Israeli raid that led to still more rocket attacks and more Israeli air attacks in response. Similar exchanges took place in May and November 2019.

Yet Hamas was losing. The casualty rate was running at better than a hundred to one in Israel’s favor while conditions in Gaza continued to deteriorate. In March 2019, Hamas security forces beat and tortured local labor activists trying to organize a “revolt of the hungry” against inflation and corruption — this while sending out thousands of unarmed civilians in a vain attempt to crash through Israeli border defenses merely so Israeli snipers could shoot them down by the hundreds.²⁸ (Western peace activists cheered the phony theatrics of “the great march of return” while ignoring the labor protests.) By 2022, per-capita income in Gaza was 75% below that of the West Bank due to the economic blockade and the incessant warfare that Hamas was helping to promote.²⁹

Even worse was Hamas’s deteriorating position on the diplomatic front. Initiated by the Trump administration and carried on by Biden, the so-called Abraham Accords were an attempt to shore up U.S. control of the Persian Gulf, source of some 40% of the world’s fossil fuels. The goal was threefold: establish an axis of power between the U.S. and Israel on one hand and Saudi Arabia and other gulf states on the other; shut out Iran even more completely, and keep out China, which had alarmed the White House by brokering a Tehran-Riyadh rapprochement in March 2023. The goal was also to shut out the Palestinians. Mahmoud Abbas, the thoroughly tame head of the corrupt Palestinian Authority on the West Bank, might still have a say in matters if he continued to cooperate. But Hamas would not. The Abraham Accords were designed to allow Israel to continue raining down bombs on Gaza while selling arms to weapons-hungry Gulf states that claimed to have the Palestinians’ best interests at heart.

Holy war was Hamas’s answer to growing encirclement. Their hearts blazing with religious fervor, Muslims from throughout the Middle East would descend on the Jewish state and break the Zionist blockade once and for all. Or so Hamas said. As the 1988 covenant put it: “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through jihad.”³⁰ Yet here was Israel breaking free of *its* encirclement by virtue of its alliance with U.S. imperialism while Hamas continued to languish in its coastal redoubt. A strategy of endless warfare had come to naught.

This is why Hamas launched its October 7 operation, i.e., to bloody Israel’s nose and thereby spur the Muslim masses into action. But the strategy never had a chance. Not only were Hamas’s methods repellent, but it failed to reckon with Muslim exhaustion after a half century or more of war and economic failure. Lebanon, home of Hezbollah, is in an economic free fall, its GDP down a stunning 67% over the last half decade according to World Bank figures. Post-civil war Syria is in even worse shape with an even more catastrophic 87% decline in GDP since the violence began in 2011. Iraq is little more than an American satrapy thanks to the 2003 U.S. invasion while Iran — its economy down 36% since 2011 due to U.S. sanctions — is in no mood for foreign adventures. Neither is Egypt, which kicked out a chaotic Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, nor Jordan, which, under the iron rule of King Abdullah II, expelled Hamas in 1999.

The broader Muslim population was in no mood to throw itself into the fire. “For Hamas,” the Palestinian-American political analyst Tareq Baconi noted, “success was thought to be predestined. The movement’s leaders believe that Hamas’s Islamic character would offer a robust ideological framework through which to offset the worldly pressures that had hamstrung the PLO before it.”³¹ Yet worldly pressures were bearing down regardless. Thanks to its backwards ideology, Hamas had badly misjudged the correlation of forces.

But this raises a question. Did Hamas really blunder on October 7? Did it really miscalculate in thinking the Muslim masses would rally to its side? Or did it deliberately launch a war it could not win out of a misplaced desire for martyrdom? The Muslim Brotherhood death cult has ample precedent. In the 1920s, Rashid Rida, a Syrian-Egyptian fundamentalist who became the Brotherhood’s ideological godfather, wrote that Zionists were at a disadvantage because they were too fond of life.³² In 2014, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh told a Hamas rally, “We are a people who value death, just like our enemies value life.”³³ (Israel granted Haniyeh’s wish by assassinating him in Tehran in July.) Ghazi Hamad, a member of the Hamas politburo, added in a TV interview in Beirut a few weeks after the October 7 assault, “We are called a nation of martyrs, and are proud to sacrifice martyrs.”³⁴

Martyrdom was thus an asset, an instrument of conquest. But what precisely did Hamad mean about sacrificing martyrs — that Hamas was proud to sacrifice individual fighters or the nation as a whole? Hamad said in the same interview, “We must teach Israel a lesson, and we will do this again and again. The Al-Aqsa Flood is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth, because we have the determination, the resolve, and the capabilities to fight. . . . October 7, October 10, October 1,000,000 — everything we do is justified.”³⁵

What was the point of offering the Israelis a tailor-made justification for continuing their mass bombing campaign? Was Hamad seeking to buck up morale with a show of bravado? Or was he trying to egg Israel on to even greater heights of violence so as to fulfill the Palestinians’ destiny as a nation of martyrs?